



Cheryl and Dale Nygaard brought two of their Gypsy Cob horses to the Calgary Stampede. | BARBARA DUCKWORTH PHOTO

CALGARY STAMPEDE | HORSES

# Ranchers tout Gypsies

BY BARBARA DUCKWORTH

CALGARY BUREAU

CALGARY — Dale and Cheryl Nygaard opted for new when they decided to add horses to their Saskatoon area ranch.

They had read about the Gypsy Cob horse in a magazine, and an internet search found a herd of 125 in England that could provide the quality they wanted.

They bought six mares from the breeder in 2008, of which five were pregnant. Last year they imported two more mares and two stallions. They now have 25 horses and want to build up the herd to about 40.

"There are thousands of them all over in Europe. All our foundation stock was imported from England," Dale said.

The breed is descended from the sturdy horses that Gypsies used to pull their caravans.

There are about 250 Gypsy Cobs in Canada. They are a mixture of Shire, Clydesdales, Dale and Fell ponies. The breed was recognized in Europe about 80 years ago, but the horses were often sold for slaughter until interest piqued in the versatile animal in the 1990s for riding and driving.

Canada does not yet recognize the breed, so the Nygaards joined two U.S. registries.

A lack of written records on the breed means most of what is known of the Gypsy Cob was passed down through oral history. Most were bred in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

The breed was first exported to the United States in 1997, where they were renamed Gypsy Vanners after

the gypsy caravan. They are also known as Tinkers, Gypsy Horses and Irish Cobs.

The Nygaards recently brought two of their horses to the Calgary Stampede, where visitors were drawn to the quiet, sturdy animals with long manes and feathers around their feet like a Clydesdale. They have a short back, muscular neck, stocky bones and large feet. Colour is variable but is usually black and white. The average horse stands 14 hands high but they can range from 12 to 15.2 hands.

"Ninety five percent of people go, 'what is that? We never heard of them,'" Dale said. "We are trying to let Canadians know there is a different type of horse out there."

The horses are not formally shown because there are too few of them.

"There are not a lot of events for us to compete in yet with an unknown breed," he said.

The Nygaards find the horses to be versatile enough for riding and driving at their farm, North Fork Gypsy Cobs.

Cheryl came from the Toronto business world and had no horse experience, but she has adopted the western lifestyle and is learning to ride and work with horses. She is completing training as a counselor and wants to offer equine assisted therapy on the farm because the horses are quiet and easy to work with.

"Part of the concept of the ranch is to allow people to experience horses. This breed was the perfect fit," she said.

The Gypsy Cob is one of 18 breeds on display at the Stampede, which runs from July 9-18.